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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000434

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STATE FOR EAP/MLS, NSC FOR WALTON

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [PINR](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: DON,T CALL IT A COMEBACK: THAKSIN,S PARTY LOOKS TO
REASSERT CONTROL OF NORTHEAST THAILAND

REF: A. BANGKOK 424 (ALL EYES ON THAKSIN CASE)

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 380 (RED HEARTLAND)

[1](#)C. BANGKOK 09 2587 (THAILAND,S LOWER NORTHEAST)

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Classified By: Political Counselor George Kent, reasons 1.4 (b, d)

SUMMARY AND COMMENT

[1](#)1. (C) Fugitive former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's Puea Thai political party appears poised to reassert its political pre-eminence in one of its traditional strongholds in Northeastern Thailand, aka Isaan. Unlike in central Isaan (REF B), and south-central Issan (REF C), where the trend lines suggest Puea Thai may be waning in influence, in the vote-rich easternmost corner of Isaan, the party's current popularity vastly exceeds its comparably modest share of the area's parliamentary seats. A recent sweep through the provinces of Ubon Ratchathani, Amnat Charoen, and Yasothon further revealed that the party's fortunes may also be boosted in the area by the explosive growth of Puea Thai's ideological partners in arms, the United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (the UDD, aka the "red shirts"). Puea Thai's apparent ascendance in these provinces may well come at the expense of the ruling Democrat party, which currently holds five MP seats. While long standing alliances with power brokers in the area and evidence of a willingness to engage in money politics suggests the Democrats may be able to maintain a toehold, the news is not encouraging for the Democrat party in the area on balance.

[1](#)2. (C) Comment: Above and beyond all the political jockeying unfolding in advance of the next round of elections, the red-shirt movement appears to be gaining steam in Ubon Ratchathani, even if the movement has splintered into as many as seven smaller groups. The Ubon Ratchathani red-shirts held their largest rally ever -- some 30,000 people -- on February 1; local leaders told us they planned to send supporters to Bangkok for the next big rally in unprecedented numbers. The contrast between higher red-shirt fervor in Ubon and more low key movements in neighboring Amnat Charoen and Yasothon mirrors the situation in Udon Thani (vigorous red-shirt movement) and Khon Kaen/Kalasin provinces (less so)

we saw in late January (ref B), suggesting that localized dynamics and the quality of local red-shirt leaders remain key factors. End Summary and Comment.

UBON RATCHATHANI -- THAKSIN BACK IN BUSINESS?

13. (C) From February 10-12, we traveled through Ubon Ratchathani, Amnat Charoen and Yasothon, three provinces which collectively constitute probably the second most supportive area for Thaksin after Udon Thani (REF B). Ubon Ratchathani, which dwarfs its neighboring provinces with nearly 1.8 million people and eleven parliamentary seats, is the fourth most populous province in all of Thailand. Despite the widespread support for Thaksin and his Puea Thai political party in the province, Puea Thai currently boasts only four of the province's MPs elected in December 2007; meanwhile, the Democrat party has three seats, Chart Thai Pattana holds three, and Puea Pandin holds one. With the Puea Thai firmly on its feet and able to lay claim to Thaksin's successful populist legacy (Ref B), the party is eager to fence off Isaan from political interlopers once again.

14. (C) Ubon Ratchathani University Political Science professor Phruk Thaothawin told us February 10 that Puea Thai was poised to pick up several seats in the next election. According to Phruk, Thaksin remained wildly popular within the province; Puea Thai had finally begun to organize itself properly, and the red shirt movement had also picked up steam within the province, which he believed would inevitably translate into increased support for Puea Thai during the next election. The red shirts' "double standards" campaign had resonated in Ubon Ratchathani, and an increasingly aware

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and active electorate within the province would seek to mete out justice against the Democrat party at the ballot box. Finally, key politicians in the province knew which way the winds were blowing, and he predicted several MPs would likely switch to Puea Thai out of a fear that running under any other banner would lead to a loss.

15. (C) Chuwit Pitakpornpunlop, a five-time parliamentarian and one of Puea Thai's current MPs, brimmed with confidence about the party's prospects moving forward. Chuwit told us February 12 that the people of Ubon were disillusioned with the current government's stewardship of the economy and the lack of judicial accountability; he predicted Puea Thai would win a minimum of seven seats in the next election. Ubon core red-shirt leader Pichet Tabutda, who confirmed to us that red shirt support for Puea Thai was unequivocal, asserted that Puea Thai would easily win eight seats, a net gain of five. Pichet suggested the only truly nettlesome issue for the party would be settling on the candidates to represent the party. With so many qualified politicians ready, willing, and able to run, the real interesting political battles would take place within the party.

REDS RISING IN UBON RATCHATHANI

16. (C) According to interlocutors from all sides of the political spectrum, the red shirt movement is experiencing growth within the province. Veenus Eiamsa-ard, Chairman of the Ubon Journalist Association, told us that the growth of the red-shirt movement in the province was organic and had occurred without any outside injection of funding from Thaksin or the national red-shirt chapter leaders. Professor Phruk told us the red shirt education camps had been wildly successful within Ubon, telling us that graduates of the camps tended to become active and enthusiastic force multipliers for the cause. Red shirt leader Pichet seconded this assessment, adding that the proliferation of red-shirt radio stations within the province had become an additional boon for the movement. The red shirts had established three

separate local red community radio stations; a year ago, there were none.

¶7. (C) Pichet told us the red-shirts in the province were divided into seven different sub-groupings, though he stressed they came together when it mattered most, as on February 1, when over 30,000 filled a soccer stadium for the largest red-shirt gathering in the history of the province. Pichet claimed that neither Thaksin nor the group's national red shirt core leaders had ever provided provincial organizers with a single baht to finance their activities, and that the Ubon Ratchathani red shirts funded their activities through donations and membership fees, which generally ran about 100 baht per month (\$3). (Note: Udorn red-shirt leader Kwanchai made a similar claim to us in January, ref B).

¶8. (C) During last March-April's red-shirt rallies in Bangkok, which had over 100,000 participants, only 700-800 Ubon supporters had traveled to the capital, according to Pichet. In contrast, he predicted as many as 10-20,000 could make the trip to Bangkok for the upcoming red-shirt protest tied to Thaksin's frozen assets case, which national red-shirt leaders ambitiously have described as a "Million Man March." MP Chuwit similarly suggested "at least 20,000" would go (Ref A), though journalist Veenus suggested that since red-shirts who chose to travel to Bangkok would do so on their own dime, numbers might be more limited. Pichet believed a more cost effective strategy to disrupt the government would be to keep most of the supporters at home to protest in front of provincial government institutions; he suggested the red-shirts might ultimately choose to send half of their supporters to Bangkok and keep the other half at home.

ELECTORAL CHICANERY IN UBON INCLUDES DEMOCRATS?

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¶9. (C) Dr. Nirun Phitakwatchara, a member of the national Human Rights Commission, told us February 12 that MPs in Ubon Ratchathani, as in other provinces, were primarily interested in politics as a way of advancing their narrow business interests. Dr. Nirun, a self professed yellow-shirt, admitted all political parties were guilty of this practice and estimated that in Ubon Ratchathani, the price for an MP seat ran around 30-40 million baht (around \$1 million). Most of the MPs had construction businesses, he added, and worked to secure preferential contracts for the businesses after the election as a way of "getting a strong return on their investment."

¶10. (C) Journalist Veenus alleged to us that the Democrat party owed at least a portion of its good electoral fortune in Ubon to its success at playing the money politics game. Veenus recounted for us her own personal role in revealing an alleged vote-buying scandal involving the Democrats in 2007, which led to an Election Commission (ECT) investigation. The party -- including Deputy party leader Withun Nambut and three party MP candidates from Ubon -- were accused of paying voters for their support inside a local movie theater. The ECT ultimately dropped the case against Withun in October of 2008, however, citing lack of evidence.

¶11. (C) Veenus told us that while the ECT was still investigating the case, she was given a video with clear evidence of money being exchanged for votes within the movie theater. According to Veenus, the video clearly implicated Withun and others, including former PM Chuan Leekpai. Veenus told us that she flew to Bangkok with the intention of handing the tape over to the ECT. Upon landing in Bangkok, however, she said she was forced into a car and driven against her will to the home of Democrat MP Kraisaak Choonhavan, who was not home at the time. There she met Yuthapan Meechai, aka "Joe," Kraisaak's assistant, as well as

Thaworn Senneam, who now serves as the Deputy Interior Minister. Joe and Thaworn supposedly presented her with a piece of paper with a statement promising that she would not hand over the video, and encouraged her to sign it. According to Veenus, given the atmosphere, and the implied threat and encouragement, she felt compelled to do so.

WHY CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

¶12. (C) We traveled to Amnat Charoen and Yasothon, two provinces which splintered off from Ubon Ratchathani in 1993 and 1972, respectively, on February 11. Amnat Charoen, with a population of just 370,000, is one of Thailand's least populous provinces, while Yasothon has approximately 540,000 residents. Amnat Charoen has only two MPs, one from Puea Thai and one Democrat, while Yasothon has four: one from Puea Thai, one Democrat, and two from Puea Pandin.

¶13. (C) Amnat Charoen Vice Governor Pawin Chamniprasat told us that unlike in many larger provinces, the red and yellow shirts in Amnat Charoen lived and worked side by side without incident. Red and yellow shirts were friends, colleagues and even relatives, and a sense of collegiality existed between the two groups that he believed was absent in larger provinces. While red shirt supporters far outnumbered their yellow counterparts, the rallies they held tended to be very civil and low key. Yellow-shirts were not particularly active, he added. Even the Puea Thai and Democrat MPs worked together closely on provincial issues in a relationship that he believed symbolized the spirit of partnership in the province. KPI Development Council leader Chartwat Ruamsook seconded the Vice Governor's comments, adding that he was working to see whether the red-yellow civil dialogue that existed in Amnat Charoen could be replicated on a national scale.

¶14. (C) Yasothon Vice Governor Prawat Theethakaew echoed his Amnat Charoen counterpart in characterizing Yasothon as a model of civility when it came to the red-yellow divide.

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Protests in the province tended to be short and uneventful, he maintained, and he hoped the dynamic could be exported nationwide. Even local Puea Thai provincial powerbroker Phiraphan Phalusuk agreed that red and yellow shirts worked together amiably on the provincial level; he noted, however, that red-shirts outnumbered yellow-shirts by a large margin in the region. Phiraphan predicted Puea Thai would capture all four Yasothon seats in the next election.

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